In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

Concept of Democracy in Islam

The current uprising, mainly spearheaded by the Muslim youth against undemocratic, unjust, and tyrannical regimes in the Arab world makes it incumbent upon us to understand the concept of democracy from an Islamic perspective. This will also help us to address the question of the compatibility of present day democracy with Islam.

The concept of representative democracy arose largely from ideas and institutions that developed during the European Middle Ages and the Age of Enlightenment and in the American and French Revolutions. Basically, democracy refers to a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected representatives under a free electoral system. Etymologically, it is derived from the French démocratie, from the Latin democratia, and from the Greek demokratia, a compound formed from demos 'people' and -kratía 'rule', giving the meaning of popular government or government by the populace at large.

In Islam, the notion of popular consent though permissible is not essential. The Qur’an praises those who manage their affairs by mutual consultation (al-Shura, 42:38). For Sunnis, the political authority should ideally be elected by the people or their representatives as was the case for the election of Othman (RA) and Ali (RA) as caliphs. The system of Bai’ah or allegiance that was in vogue was an expression of the collective vote or people’s acceptance to the election of the caliph. Therefore, the democratic ideal of a government by the people is in essence compatible with the notion of an Islamic democracy.

The early Islamic philosopher and political scientist al-Farabi (d. 950) in one of his most notable works al-Madina al-Fadilah (The Virtuous City) theorized the ideal Islamic state and compared it to Plato’s Republic. However, departing from the platonist view, he regarded the ideal state to be ruled by the Prophet/Imam (leader) instead of the philosopher king envisaged by Plato. In absence of the Prophet, al-Farabi considered democracy to be closest to the ideal state as practiced during the times of the rightly guided caliphs (Khulaf’a Rashidun). This republican order of the early Islamic caliphate of the rightly guided caliphs degenerated into the imperfect dynastic rules of the Umayyads and the Abbasids that resembled a monarchy.

In modern times, the Islamic philosopher Allama Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) also viewed the early Islamic caliphate as being compatible with democracy. He welcomed the formation of popular elected legislative assemblies in the Muslim world as a return to the original purity of Islam. He argued that Islam had the “germs of an economic and democratic organization of society” but this growth was stunted by the expansive Muslim conquests which established the caliphate as a great Islamic empire but led to political Islamic ideals being repaganized and the early Muslims losing sight of the most important potentialities of their faith.

We understand from these two great scholars of Islam that the spirit of democracy is indeed embedded in the pure form of Islam that was established by Muhammad (SAW) and practiced by the rightly guided caliphs.

How compatible is the notion of democracy based on popular sovereignty with Islamic democracy? The writings of Jean Bodin (d. 1596) provide us with an early theorization of the idea of sovereignty. Commonly understood, sovereignty is the supreme authority in a political community. The origin of popular sovereignty dates back to the period between mid 1600s and mid 1700s. It is the belief that the legitimacy of the state is created by the will or consent of its people who are the sources of all political power. In other words, it is the people who make the law, either by themselves or through their elected representatives.

What does Islam say about sovereignty? The Qur’an says, “Authority belongs to God alone, and He orders you to worship none but Him: this is the true faith, though most people do not realize it” (Yusuf, 12:40). Islam admits of no sovereignty except that of God and, consequently, does not recognize any Lawgiver other than Him. Islam does not totally exclude human legislation. It only limits its scope and guides it on right lines. Human legislation, according to Islam, is and should be subject to the Supremacy of Divine law and within the limits prescribed by it. According to a hadith, “The likeness of a believer is that of a horse tied to a peg…” The believers can legislate and move about freely within the limits and boundaries set for them by Allah (SWT). “…These are God's boundaries, so do not transgress them…” (al-Baqarah, 2:229). And those who live within the limit will pursue happiness in this world and the next. It
follows, therefore, that man cannot have absolute freedom and legislate what is harmful to man. What is destroying our society today? Indeed, it is the manmade law that has legalized numerous acts such as usury, gambling, drinking, adultery, fornication, prostitution, homosexuality, and other lewd and shameful deeds that are clearly immoral, unethical, and against dictates of human nature, conscience and reasoning. This is leading the entire world to ruin.

Islam is not only about rituals of worship. Allah (SWT) in His infinite knowledge, wisdom, and mercy has guided humanity at all levels—moral, ethical, social, economical, and political. Allah has never abandoned people. Over the course of history of man, He continually guided them for what truly makes them happy and sent to them prophets and messengers as givers of glad tidings and also to warn the people so that men may not have any excuse against Allah (SWT) on the Day of Judgment. “Messengers (have been sent) bringing good news and giving warning, so that people will have no argument against Allah after the coming of the Messengers. Allah is Almighty, All-Wise” (al-Nisa’, 4:165).

Muhammad (SAW) was the seal of all of God’s prophets and messengers. He brought to humanity God’s last gift al-Huda (the guidance/the Qur’an), and the true din (way of life), the true system of justice and just social order. We are in our 3rd century after the so-called democracy that promised freedom and justice for all. But where is it today? The world today is worse off than any other time. Where is freedom? Where is happiness? Where is peace? Unless we pay attention to the One Allah (SWT) who is truly the establisher of justice and follow His guidance, the desired peace everyone dreams of will never be achieved. “God bears witness that there is no god but Him, as do the angels and those who have knowledge. He upholds justice. There is no god but Him, the Almighty, the All Wise” (al-Imran 3:18).

Allah (SWT)’s justice flows from Himself to the prophets and then from them to the believers. “We have sent Our messengers with clear proofs, and We sent down with them the Book (Law) and the balance, that the people may uphold justice...” (al-Hadid, 57:25). It was the role of the prophets and messengers to establish justice on behalf of Allah (SWT). After the demise of the Prophet (SAW) and the finality of his prophethood, justice is entrusted upon the believers, “O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor: for Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest you swerve, and if you distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well-acquainted with all that you do” (al-Nisa’, 4:135). This ayah explains to us that after Muhammad (SAW), it is the people that rule but the rule should be based on justice and fairness. This is the collective rule of the believers that Allah has set. Justice has to be upheld at all costs, whether it involves oneself, one’s relative, one’s friend or one’s foe. In this sense, the concept of rule by the people is truly centuries old and was practiced by the rightly guided caliphs. Unfortunately this just rule turned into monarchy during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. The generally ruthless rule of these two dynasties gave way to corruption and mischief, as a consequence of which, Allah (SWT) who is the possessor of authority, in due course, took away the leadership from them. Subsequently, the world saw other Muslim empires crumble one by one culminating in the termination of the caliphate wielded by the Ottoman Empire (al-Khilafah Othmainia) back in 1924.

Despite these upheavals, history is witness that religious pluralism, a much debated topic today was practiced centuries ago throughout the Muslim Rule. All religious communities had the right to exercise their own courts. Religious pluralism is rooted in our history of governing and the political system of Islam. Muslim Rule also provided everyone with freedom of speech.

Democracy in Islam is not based on popular sovereignty but on popular vicegerency. We are the vicegerents of Allah on earth. As vicegerents, we only have a delegated authority. The system of governing becomes the collective rule under the rule of Allah (SWT). Interestingly, this democracy with the element of ‘theo’ (a combining form meaning God) fixed in it has been alluded to not only by contemporary Muslim scholars and thinkers such as Mawdudi (d.1979), founder of Jama’at-e-Islami and Dr. Israr Ahmad (d. 2010), founder of Tanzeem-e-Islami but much earlier by Joseph Smith Jr. (d. 1844), founder of the Latter Day Saint movement (Mormonism). According to Smith, the democracy was meant to be a fusion of traditional republican democratic rights under the United States Constitution with theocratic principles—a system under which God and the people held the power to rule in righteousness.

According to a hadith, Prophet (SAW) is reported to have enumerated five periods of our history beginning from his time until the end of times. The meaning of this hadith is that he (SAW) would remain till the time Allah willed; then he would go. Then there will be vicegerency in his footsteps till the time Allah (SWT) willed. Then there will be a cruel kingship (rule of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties). Then there will be imposed kingship (colonialism and imperialism). Then there will be once again vicegerency in the footsteps of the Prophet (SAW).

Apparently, what we are witnessing today is the new phase of the last chapter of human history. Let us pray to Allah (SWT) for all the Muslim brothers and sisters who have stood up against all forms of dictatorship and tyranny in order to establish democracy and the rule of justice.

End

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